



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

## **Standard English versus General American**

### **- Which Variety is Preferred in Swedish Classrooms?**

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**C-level essay**

**Dept. of Languages and Literatures/English**

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## Abstract

**Department of Languages and Literatures: C-level essay**

**Title:** *Standard English versus General American - Which Variety is Preferred in Swedish Classrooms?*

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General American and Standard English are the two main varieties of English found in Swedish schools. Traditionally only Standard English has been taught, but lately General American has been taught as well. Nowadays, both varieties – General American and Standard English – are found in the Swedish National Curriculum and as a result of this, I think, problems may occur when deciding which variety to teach in the Swedish classroom. My aim with this study is to find out the attitudes of twelve EFL teachers of English towards different varieties of English, namely Standard English and General American. Furthermore, I want to find out if these attitudes are reflected in their classroom teaching as well as what their views are on students' use of the variety of English in question. The study was carried out in two Swedish upper secondary schools located in Gothenburg and Varberg. The participants are asked to fill in a questionnaire including "alternative" and "open ended" questions. The results of my study show that the Standard English variety is more commonly used among Swedish upper secondary school teachers when teaching English, than the General American variety is. Furthermore, the teachers' attitudes towards the varieties illustrate that Standard English is considered as "*nice*", "*formal*", "*correct*", "*intelligent*", etcetera. General American is described as being "*friendlier*", "*young approached*" and "*down to earth*" and so forth.

**Keywords:** General American, British English, Attitudes, Standard English, Language variety, Upper Secondary School.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

English, with its different dialects and varieties of accents, is spoken by hundreds of millions of people all around the world. I also believe that most teachers prefer to teach a standard variety of English – whether it is Standard English or General American. Standard English and General American are the varieties encountered in most teaching materials and the two varieties predominantly used. One of the reasons for this is because these two standard varieties are seen as prestige versions of English and are often referred to as the “superior” and “correct” models. Teachers of English as a foreign language emphasize teaching English as a so-called international language (EIL), which is also referred to as “English as a lingua franca” (ELF).

In Swedish schools, where English is a core subject, General American and British English are to be found. In Swedish National Curriculum, one goal for the students to aim for is to *“deepen their understanding of English as spoken in different parts of the world, and improve their ability to understand the contents communicated by different media”* (Skolverket). Before, British English was the only variety taught in Swedish schools, but when the new National Curriculum, Lpf 94, was introduced, it was clarified that British English or General American can be used when teaching English (lecture: Erickson, 2009-09-09). Ever since, teachers can choose between the two standard varieties British English or General American when teaching.

## 1.2 Aim and scope

In this C-essay my aim is to determine which variety of English *a few* (twelve) teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) from two upper secondary schools in Sweden, Varberg and Gothenburg, use when teaching English. I intend to answer the following questions:

- What are the teachers’ attitudes towards the predominant varieties General American and Standard English?
- Are the teachers’ attitudes towards these English varieties reflected in their classroom teaching?
- Do teachers have preconceived opinions about Standard English and General American?

- What are the teachers' views on students' use of the variety of English in question?

Therefore, the main aim of this study is to find out which variety – Standard English or General – is preferred in these two Swedish classrooms.

### **1.3 Material and method**

My study is in the form of a *questionnaire-study* (see appendix 1), which is used in order for me to find out what the teachers' attitudes towards the predominant varieties General American and Standard English are, as well as whether their attitudes towards these English varieties are reflected in their classroom teaching. Do teachers have preconceived opinions about Standard English and General American? I examine what these teachers' views are on students' use of the variety of English in question.

In order to attain maximum reliability, a pilot study has been used, which confirms that the questions in the questionnaire actually give the answers to what I intend to investigate. The pilot study was carried out with five teachers in the Gothenburg region.

The questionnaire includes the following questions:

1. What English variety do you speak?
2. What is the reason for speaking this variety?
3. Which variety do you prefer, General American or Standard English? Why?
4. What variety is being taught in your classroom? Why?
5. Which variety – General American or Standard English – would you like your students to speak? Why?
6. What do you think of General American and Standard English?

A questionnaire is used in my research for different reasons. Firstly, I think that it is easier for me to get hold of more teachers for my research if I use a questionnaire since it is not that time-consuming. Secondly, one of the questions is an “alternative” question and the rest are “open ended” questions. The reason for using more “open ended” questions is because I think that it is easier for me to acquire information about the teachers' way of thinking in this way than with solid answers.

In addition, the study is both *qualitative* and *quantitative*. It is qualitative in view of the fact that it contains detailed descriptions of the teachers' thoughts about the English varieties as well as my interpretations of the results. In addition, the study is quantitative since it includes statistics regarding the item I study.

A questionnaire which, as my pilot study demonstrates, only takes approximately fifteen minutes to fill in is something I hope the teachers will find reasonable. The target group of my study are twelve randomly selected teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) in two upper secondary schools located in Varberg and Gothenburg, in Sweden. The teachers are 23 - 42 years old. Since I want my study to be as wide and authentic as possible, even though including very few participants, I have chosen two different schools. In addition, the teachers teach in various programs which hopefully will provide more breadth in this study. I have got an even number of teachers from each school and the distribution of women and men is even as well. The total number of participants in this study is thus twelve.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. No names are mentioned in the presentation of results for the reason that the names are irrelevant. The participants are informed about this in order to feel relaxed and not fear of any blame if they told something less pleasant.

#### ***1.4 Plan of study***

In Chapter 1 – **Introduction** – a brief background regarding the selection of study area is provided. The aim and scope of the study is stated and the selection of material as well as participants for this study is described. The questions used in the questionnaire are presented as well. In Chapter 2 – **Previous research** – different studies on teachers' and students' attitudes towards the varieties of the English language are presented. In Chapter 3 – **Standard English and General American varieties** – a review of the theoretical basis of the study is presented. Standard English and General American are described as well as the major differences between Standard English and American English. In addition, English taught in Swedish schools is introduced. In Chapter 4 – **Results and Discussion** – the results of the analysis of data from the questionnaires are presented and discussed. In Chapter 5 – **Summary and Conclusion** – a summary and various conclusions based on my findings are presented. Questionnaires mentioned in the essay are to be found at the end of the study in the appendixes.

## 2. Previous research

Investigating which variety of English teachers and students in Sweden use has been a very popular subject in recent years. In this chapter I present different studies on teachers' and students' attitudes towards varieties of English taught in Swedish schools, as well as previous researchers' conclusions derived from their research.

In 2006, a study called "*Varieties of English in the Swedish Classroom*" was conducted by Hurtig. The aim of the study was to investigate the thoughts of teachers of English from Swedish secondary schools regarding English varieties. The teachers were interviewed in order for Hurtig to find out their attitudes towards the different dialects. Moreover, the investigator examined what the teachers' views were on students' use of these varieties, and if they themselves actually spoke the variety they thought they did.

The results of the study show that almost all the teachers used the British English variety when teaching. Teachers thought that British English was more "formal", "correct" and "strict", etcetera than General American. General American was seen as "softer" and "friendlier" than British English. When asking the teachers what their views were on the students' use of British English and General American, the results show that the majority of the teachers thought that it was essential for the students to be familiar with the differences of the two dialects. Hurtig concluded that British English was the most general variety of English used when teaching English in Swedish secondary schools (Hurtig 2006).

In another study, Söderlund and Modiano, 2002, investigated whether students in a Swedish upper secondary school used British English or General American when speaking. In order to find out which variety the students used, the students were asked to translate different words from Swedish into English. A part of the results showed that 12.4 per cent of the students used the American word *fall* while 73.4 per cent used the British word *autumn*. The remaining students did not give an answer to this question. Moreover, 55.3 per cent of the students used the American word *truck* while 28 per cent used the British word *lorry*. When the students were to choose between the words *candy* (Sw. 'godis') and *sweets* (Sw. 'sötsaker') 81.2 percent of the students clarified that they used the American word *candy*, while 7.8 per cent used the British word *sweets*. The study shows that many students thought that *sweets* means 'sötsaker' (Sw.), and not 'godis' (Sw.). Modiano and Söderlund also concluded that Swedish students were very much influenced by General American media (Modiano and Söderlund 2002).

In 2008, Thörnstrand conducted a study with the aim of finding out what variety – General American or British English – 108 upper secondary school students were using. Furthermore, she wished to find out whether or not there were any differences between girls and boys as well as if they were aware of their usage of English. The students were asked to translate a number of sentences with words that differ in General American and British English, as well as fill in a questionnaire concerning spelling. The students were also recorded when reading different sentences.

The results of the study show that the majority of the students, especially the girls, pointed out that they used General American when it came to pronunciation as well as vocabulary. Furthermore, the study shows that the tendency is that many students, in particular the girls, unconsciously mixed General American and British English. In addition, the survey indicates that girls and boys differed in pronunciation and vocabulary. The girls used General American in pronunciation more than the boys. However, the results show that boys tended to use General American more than girls. Thörnstrand drew the conclusion that the majority of the 108 upper secondary school students used General American more than British English (Thörnstrand 2008).

Another researcher named Östlund, 2005, conducted a study named “*British vs American English – Pronunciation in the EFL Classroom*” where the aim was to find out teachers’ and students’ attitudes towards General American and British English, as well as whether the students use General American, British English or a mix of these. Östlund was also interested in finding out the reason why students used a particular variety. The results indicate that the majority of the students mixed the two varieties – General American and British English – and were mostly influenced by media and their teachers. Moreover, most students used British English when reading words found in a wordlist, while using more General American when reading words found in a context. Another interesting finding made by Östlund is that the majority of students put forward that they speak a variety that they actually do not according to the results.

Furthermore, the teachers and the students described British English as “snobbish”, and General American as “cocky”. Another interesting finding made by Östlund is that if a teacher used a certain variety – British English or General American – then the students were most likely to do that as well (Östlund 2005).



### 3. Standard English and General American varieties

#### 3.1 What is Standard English and General American - An Overview

In the Macmillan Dictionary, Standard English is defined as “the form of spoken and written English that is considered acceptable by most people”. In addition, in *Language, Society and Power*, Thomas et al explain that “part of the ideology of Standard English is that it is the ‘correct’ form of the language and that other varieties are ‘incorrect’” (Thomas et al 2004: 174). Furthermore, they make clear that Standard English “is the dialect of institutions such as government and the law; it is the dialect of literacy and education; it is the dialect taught as ‘English’ to foreign learners; and it is the dialect of the higher social classes” (ibid.); thus adding that Standard English is the prestige form of English (ibid.). Additionally, Thomas et al (2004: 190) explicate that using Standard English in such high-status contexts as the ones mentioned above means that the status of Standard English is strengthened. Moreover, it means that to participate in the high-status functions/contexts, one is obliged to use Standard English (ibid.).

Received Pronunciation (RP) is a variety of British English. What is more, RP is considered to be a social dialect rather than a regional one and thus does not have regional features (Rönnerdal and Johansson. 2005:12). In Wikipedia [[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Received\\_Pronunciation](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Received_Pronunciation)] it is stated that there are “three different forms of RP: Conservative, General, and Advanced. Conservative RP refers to a traditional accent associated with older speakers within certain social backgrounds; General RP is often considered neutral regarding age, occupation, or lifestyle of the speaker; and Advanced RP refers to speech of younger generation of British speakers”. Rönnerdal and Johansson put forward that this variety is used in the media as well as in public schools, which is the reason why it is often referred to as “BBC English”. Received Pronunciation is spoken by approximately 3 per cent of English native speakers (2005:12). Furthermore, Thomas et al explain that Received Pronunciation is the accent of the wealthy and the educated which does not give any information as to where the speaker comes from (Thomas et al 2004:67).

General American (also referred to as AE, AmEng, USEng, AmE, en-US, U.S. English and United States English) is generally defined as being the chief accent of any American English that is somewhat free of outstanding regional influences. Moreover, General American is very much encountered in TV, radio, movies, as well as advertisement, etcetera [[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General\\_American](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_American)]. Furthermore, Modiano explains that Gen-

eral American is the English dialect spoken by approximately 70 per cent of the native speakers of English – in particular in the west – thus making it the most widespread variety in the US (Modiano 1996: 10). In 1828, Noah Webster wrote the first American dictionary with the aim to show that people in the US – at that time a somewhat new country – speak in a different way than those living in Britain [[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General\\_American](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_American)].

### **3.2 Major differences between Standard English and General American**

Pyles and Algeo state that “English is unmistakably one language, with two major national varieties: British and American” (1993:212). Thomas et al put forward rather the same when stating that there are various varieties of Standard English globally. Nonetheless, there are two major standard varieties: Standard English and Standard American English, which both, in spite of sharing many similarities, also have their differences (Thomas et al 2004:175).

According to Svartvik and Leech, 2006, the most apparent differences between British English and General American can be detected in vocabulary as well as in pronunciation. Approximately 4000 words differ in British English and General American. For instance, in General American one uses the word *cell phone*, whilst the British English equivalent is *mobile phone* (Svartvik and Leech 2006:153). In terms of the pronunciation of postvocalic /r/ - i.e. the /r/ sound after a vowel in words like *store*, *car* and *father* - there is an additional obvious difference between British English and General American. People who speak British English do *not* pronounce the /r/, while people speaking General American do (Modiano 1996:15).

Furthermore, there are also words that differ in terms of stress. For instance, in words like *address*, *magazine* and *cigarette*, people who speak British English stress the last syllable, while people speaking General American stress the first (Trudgill and Hannah 1994:54). Moreover, Trudgill and Hannah also put forward that there are differences between British English and General American in terms of spelling. For example, in General American one spells *color* without the /u/, while in British English the same word is spelled as *colour*. What is more, the word centre/center is spelled *centre* in British English and *center* in General American. There are also differences in the final sound in words like *defense* (General American), and *defence* (British English) (Trudgill & Hannah 1994:84).

### **3.3 English taught in Swedish schools**

It is commonplace that teaching a foreign language begins with the choice of that particular regional and/or social variety of the language, which is to provide the learners' linguistic model (Preisler 1999:262). However, countless of people around the world speak English, and as a result of this many different dialects can be used as a model of pronunciation when teaching English. Rönnerdal and Johansson, 2005, claim that such a model should be a dialect that is easy to understand and not restricted to a certain social or geographical area. That is, it should be a form of English encountered for example when travelling, and a form for which there is much teaching material available (2005: 12).

Traditionally, Standard British English and Received Pronunciation have been essential when teaching English as a foreign Language in Europe (Preisler 1999: 239) because of their features of a good quality model (Rönnerdal and Johansson 2005: 12). Furthermore, in *'Functions and forms of English in a European EFL country'* found in *'Standard English: The Widening Debate'* Preisler points out that the democratic society is responsible to make sure that everyone is taught enough English, in the relevant forms, to be able to cope with the linguistic manifestations of internationalisation in the media and elsewhere in their daily lives (1999:254).

In the curriculum and syllabuses for the English subject formulated by The Swedish National Agency for Education it is stated:

“The ability to use English is necessary for studies, travel in other countries and for social and professional international contacts of different kinds. The subject aims at developing an all-round communicative ability and the language skills necessary for international contacts, and an increasingly internationalised labour market, in order to take advantage of the rapid developments taking place, as a result of information and communications technologies, as well as for further studies [...] All pupils need to be prepared so that on their own they can further develop their knowledge after completing schooling. The subject thus also aims at pupils maintaining and developing their desire and ability to learn English” (Skolverket 2000. English syllabuses).

Modiano explains, “as long as the English language has been a part of the Swedish curriculum, the leading variety taught has been British English” (Modiano 1998:245-247). However,

he adds that, in recent times, “American English has begun to influence us because of its prominent status in the media” (ibid.), which has resulted in the fact that “American English has become more accepted in the classroom” (ibid.).

## 4. Results and Discussion

I have used a questionnaire in order to find out what twelve randomly selected teachers' thoughts about the predominant varieties General American and Standard English are, as well as whether their thoughts about these English varieties are reflected in their classroom teaching. Do teachers have preconceived opinions about Standard English and General American? Furthermore, I examine what these teachers' views are on students' use of the variety of English in question. In this chapter I present and analyse the results which the questionnaires have shown. The quotations indicate exactly what the participants have put forward in the questionnaires. The results are highlighted in appendix 2 as well.

### ***4.1 What English variety do you speak and why?***

A very interesting discovery is that the majority of teachers 58 per cent (N: 7) state that they speak Standard English while 33 per cent (N: 4) put forward that they speak General American. In addition, 8 per cent (N: 1) explains that she uses both varieties – Standard English and General American – when speaking.

Seven teachers point out that the reason for speaking Standard English is because they were very much influenced by their teachers. This is a very interesting discovery, I think, since these teachers themselves are probably aware of the fact that they, as teachers, most likely influence their own students in the same way as they were.

Moreover, three teachers (25 per cent) speaking General American put forward that they are influenced by art media. These days, it seems to me as if General American is starting to become more common in Swedish schools. Furthermore, I believe that the General American encountered in media may have an impact on Swedish students' speech as well. One female teacher (8 per cent) informs that she speaks Standard English since she has lived in England for thirteen years. Another teacher (8 per cent) makes clear that he speaks General American because he has relatives living in America.

This clearly shows that there are several different reasons for speaking a certain variety of English, and that the environment has a significant role in this. In addition, the variety that is used by the teachers – whether it is Standard English or General American – is very much connected to their emotional liking as well as experience. However, we see that the majority of the teachers answer that they use a particular variety of English because they were influenced by their teachers.

When looking at the age of participants another interesting discovery was made. The results show that those teachers preferring and using Standard English are about 35-50 years old, and those teachers speaking General American are about 20-35 years old.

#### **4.2 Which variety do you prefer, General American or Standard English? Why?**

One teacher explains that he prefers Standard English since he finds it sounding more “*beautiful*”, “*cooler*” and simply “*better*” than General American. Another male teacher writes that he prefers General American because it is the variety encountered most on TV, in music, when travelling, etcetera. Furthermore, one female teacher who speaks a mix of Standard English and General American points out that this very much depends on the environment – “*I think that the language is affected by the environment*” she puts forward. One teacher declares that she speaks Standard English since this variety sounds “*nicer*”.

In addition, one teacher informs that he tries to speak only “*Received Pronunciation*” because he thinks that it is of great importance to use proper and correct English. Another teacher finds Standard English, in particular “*Oxbridge and BBC English*”, more prestigious and therefore prefers this variety. One teacher prefers General American since “*there is more feeling in this variety*”. A male teacher clarifies that Standard English is more class-bound than General American. He also explains that General American is not as theoretical as Standard English, but instead has an everyday tone.

One teacher makes clear: “*I like British English better since it is the most prestigious variety that I know*”. Another points out that she finds General American more “*neutral*” and easier regarding pronunciation and spelling, which are some of the many reasons for speaking General American. “*I think that it is common that people tend to prefer the variety they were raised with*” a teacher who prefers Standard English stresses. He further explains that Standard English was used by his teachers in school and that this variety comes natural to him. Finally, one teacher who prefers Standard English refers to this variety as “*the standard and correct variety*”.

It is clear that all the teachers participating in this study have their own reasons for using a certain variety of English. Furthermore, I think that no matter what variety is used when communicating, it is of great importance that the speaker (whether it is the teacher or the student) is aware of her or his dialect so that she or he can be more secure in pronunciation and therefore avoid mistakes.

### **4.3 What variety is being taught in your classroom? Why?**

One teacher, who speaks a mix of Standard English and General American, puts forward that he thinks that it is important to present the relationship between General American and Standard English to the students, since they (General American and Standard English) influence each other. He continues by clarifying: *“There are several differences between these two varieties and they are not that clear. Therefore I think that it is OK to mix”*. I certainly agree for the reason that it may be difficult to teach and learn how to distinguish pronunciation of a foreign language like English where pronunciation differs with the various dialects. Still, I believe that the teacher must be aware of the differences and be able to explain them if necessary. If a learner of English does not distinguish the differences – in spelling, pronunciation, stress, vocabulary, and etcetera – between for instance General American and Standard English, the learner may become insecure in her or his use of language.

Another teacher explains that she thinks that it is not that relevant which variety you use when teaching as long as it is a standard variety (i.e. Standard English or General American). She explains that *“making yourself understood is more important”* and that it is essential to think of the students’ interests and needs as well. This has made her use the General American variety. One female teacher explains that she teaches General American since it is more a *“way of being”* rather than being a sign of social groups as Standard English.

Additionally, one teacher points out that she uses General American when teaching since both she and the students have a more positive attitude towards this variety (General American) than Standard English. Another teacher thinks that Standard English appears more *“educated”*, while General American is the variety of *“people belonging to the working class”* and *“the uneducated”*. Therefore she uses the Standard English variety when teaching. Another teacher puts forward rather the same thing when informing that she teaches General American since this appears less connected with class belongings.

Furthermore, a female teacher teaches Standard English because she finds it *“amusing”* and *“entertaining”*. One teacher thinks quite the same when clarifying: *“I use British English when teaching because people consider it as having a very high status”*. Another teacher informs that he finds Standard English more formal than General American. He explains: *“I prefer teaching British English. It sounds more ‘correct’”*. One male teacher prefers Standard English but has problems giving an explanation why. He writes: *“British English simply sounds better than American English does”*. Another teacher points out: *“I use a variety of American and British English. I think that it is important that the students are exposed to various*

*varieties of English so that they are better equipped outside the classroom too*". In addition, a female teacher makes clear that she thinks that it is of great importance to teach the students both Standard English and General American. She informs: *"Language is power. I \*make\* the students a huge favour"*.

A very interesting discovery is that 50 per cent (N:6) of the teachers teach Standard English. In view of this, I suppose that perhaps the old curriculum, Lgy 70, is one of the reasons why teachers have preconceived opinions about language varieties even today. This means, as mentioned earlier, that for a long time it was more or less taken for granted that British English should be the norm taught in schools. However, those teachers (33 per cent, N:4) who on the other hand teach General American could be seen in the light of the official guidelines, Lpf 94, which clarifies that British English or General American can be used when teaching English. The remaining 17 per cent (N:2) of the teachers combine Standard English and General American when teaching.

#### ***4.4 Which variety - General American or Standard English – would you like your students to speak? Why?***

One teacher prefers her students to speak Standard English since she thinks that this variety is more *"correct"*, *"intelligent"* and *"formal"*. Another teacher clarifies that since it is more accepted to speak different varieties of English nowadays, he wants his students to be familiar with several varieties and not only one. In addition, a female teacher thinks quite the same when explaining that she thinks that one does the students a favour when letting them try out different varieties. She means that in this way the students become more comfortable with using English even outside the classroom.

A male teacher makes clear that he would like his students to use Standard English since it is more *"formal"*, but thinks that the students for some reasons prefer General American. One teacher puts forward that it is important to create an environment as natural as possible where his students speak as the people in England do. Furthermore, he clarifies: *"It should be a standard variety - British or American English"*. He continues by writing that the National Curriculum also emphasize *"communication"* and *"awareness of different varieties of English"*.

In addition, another teacher points out that she does not think that the variety used in school is that important, but she prefers her students to speak General American which is the



dialect that she uses. Also another teacher thinks that it is less important what variety is used when teaching, since *“the students very often mix BrE and AmE when speaking”*. He continues by explaining that he believes that the students would benefit from encountering different varieties and not to learn one variety only.

A male teacher claims that although peoples’ views slowly change, he still sees Standard English as *“the most prestigious variety”*. Therefore, he would like his students to use this variety. Also another teacher suggests quite the same by stressing that his students prefer General American while he, on the other hand, finds Standard English *“smarter”* and *“better”*. A female teacher makes clear that she would prefer her students to use the Standard English variety since it indicates level of education as well as class.

Furthermore, one teacher informs: *“American English is easier regarding spelling”*. He continues by clarifying that this variety has a *“younger approach”* which is another reason why students should use this variety. Moreover, one teacher points out that he prefers his students to speak General American since it is *“less snobbish”* and *“more down to earth”*. He continues by writing that his students too consider General American to be *“cooler”* while Standard English is somehow more *“old-fashioned”*.

Although some teachers highlight that it is more or less impossible to require variety consistency when using English, many of them mention the benefits of a student’s ability in being consistent. Additionally, some teachers’ attitudes illustrate that a native-like speech is prestigious. However, all the teachers put forward that they encourage their students to use one variety or a mix of them no matter whether it is Standard English or General American.

Another interesting finding made when analysing the results of the study is that the teachers’ choice of variety for almost every context is decided by her or his general thought of the variety. That means, the teachers who put forward that they like General American better than Standard English prefer General American in all contexts – speaking, teaching, etcetera – and those teachers who like Standard English prefer Standard English for the same contexts.

#### **4.5 What do you think of General American and Standard English**

Common comments regarding General American have to do with formality. Seven out of twelve teachers make clear that this variety is informal. One of these comments is: *“General American is informal in relation to British English”*. Furthermore, another teacher puts forward that she thinks that this variety (i.e. General American) is *“softer”* and *“friendlier”*.

Five teachers claim that General American is easier to understand than Standard English. One of these teachers highlights: *“It is much easier to comprehend American English”*.

Another teacher explains that General American is easier and more relaxed which also makes it *“more down to earth”*. A female teacher thinks that General American sounds more *“neutral”* and is *“easier to pronounce”*, and that this variety is easier regarding spelling. In addition, one teacher stresses that General American is *“modern”* and *“mainstream”*. Another teacher points out that General American has a *“younger approach”*.

Furthermore, a female teacher writes that General American is *“the future”*. She continues by explaining that this is the variety which more and more people worldwide will adopt. I agree with this teacher in view of the fact that I personally believe that General American is on its way of becoming increasingly accepted. This means that this variety may in the near future, turn into being more common in educational contexts, and therefore more widespread in Swedish schools. Furthermore, one male teacher finds General American *“cooler”* than Standard English. However, another teacher puts forward that the intonation of General American is *“boring”* and does not have as many diphthongs as Standard English.

When it comes to the teachers’ attitudes towards Standard English one teacher stresses that Standard English is *“entertaining”* and *“nice to listen to”*. Additionally, two teachers use the word *“nice”* when expressing their attitudes towards Standard English. Another teacher clarifies: *“British English reveals something about the persons when communicating, which is nice”*. Two teachers claim that Standard English is more *“prestigious”* and has *“high status”* in comparison to General American. One of these teachers points out: *“I think that British English is the most prestigious variety of English”*. Another teacher puts forward quite the same by asserting that Standard English signals class.

Moreover, one teacher argues that Standard English sounds *“better”* and *“smart”*. The most common comments, five out of twelve, concerning Standard English has to do with the formality of this variety. One of these comments is: *“British English is more formal than American English”*. Other recurrent comments regarding Standard English are that it sounds *“correct”*, *“pure”* and *“perfect”*. Another comment regarding Standard English is: *“British English sounds intelligent”*. Negative comments concerning Standard English are that it sounds *“snobbish”*. One of these comments is: *“I find RP too snobbish”*.

My study illustrates that there are diverse attitudes towards the two major varieties of English – Standard English and General American – among the twelve teachers participating in my study. Moreover, the teachers’ attitudes towards a variety can be seen as surprisingly homogeneous. Although using different words when describing the varieties, the teachers put

forward rather the same. In other words, although the teachers use different words when describing the two varieties, to a certain extent they associate General American and Standard English more or less in the same way. Furthermore, depending on what liking the teachers have they often use different words when explaining the varieties. Words like “*prestige*”, “*high class*”, “*original*” and “*correct*” are frequently used when describing Standard English, while General American is perceived as being “*cool*”, “*younger approach*”, “*less snobbish*” and “*uneducated*”, etcetera.

## 5. Summary and Conclusion

Since we live in a world with many different cultures many different English dialects are to be found which is a reason why we are very often exposed to some of these many varieties. In addition, there are some differences – in spelling, pronunciation, words that differ in terms of stress, as well as vocabulary, etcetera – between these varieties, and as a result of this interaction difficulties may easily occur. For this reason, the attempt in this study was to investigate twelve upper secondary school teachers' attitudes towards the predominant varieties General American and Standard English by means of a questionnaire. Are their attitudes towards these English varieties reflected in their classroom teaching? Do teachers have preconceived opinions about Standard English and General American? Furthermore, I examined what these teachers' views are on students' use of the variety of English in question.

It may be concluded from this study that the Standard English variety is more commonly used among these twelve upper secondary school teachers, than the General American variety. The results show that the majority of the teachers (58 per cent, N:7) use Standard English when teaching. Furthermore, the teachers' attitudes towards the varieties Standard English and General American illustrate that Standard English is considered as “*nice*”, “*formal*”, “*correct*”, “*intelligent*”, etcetera. General American, on the other hand, is described as being “*friendlier*”, “*young approached*”, “*down to earth*”, and so forth. I conclude that the characteristics of Standard English can be seen as more preferred for educational purposes, than those of General American.

The most significant conclusion, I must say, is that Standard English is the variety that seems to be the most common and preferred one among the twelve teachers in these two Swedish upper secondary schools today. When comparing my results with those of a study called “*Varieties of English in the Swedish Classroom*” conducted by Hurtig, I discovered differences as well as similarities. That is, Hurtig also concluded that British English is the most general variety of English used when teaching English in Swedish upper secondary and secondary schools (Hurtig 2006). However, due to the fact that our studies differ in many ways, this only signals that there actually are differences as well as similarities to be found in these groups of teachers.

However, a further interesting finding emerged when comparing the ages of the teachers participating in my study. A tendency was that the majority of those teachers preferring and using Standard English were older than those preferring and using the General American variety. I suppose that the reason for this might be seen in the light of National Curriculums. That

means, that the older teachers speaking Standard English, may have been influenced from school at the time when British English was the only variety taught in Swedish schools, and that the younger teachers, speaking General American, due to the new National Curriculum, Lpf 94, might have been exposed to Standard English as well as General American.

However, my study, in addition, seems to show that there is a tendency among these twelve teachers that General American is on its way of becoming more accepted in formal contexts. That means, General American may in the near future be found in educational settings as well. When a new generation of English teachers start working in schools they will most likely have grown up with General American and thus not see General American as low-graded as many people once did. This coincides with one of the participant's belief that, in the future, Swedish students will be even more exposed to the General American variety for the reason that the teaching of General American will be more common and more accepted in Swedish schools. This is also seen in Söderlund and Modiano's, 2002, as well as in Thörnstarand's, 2008, studies where the aim was to find out which variety – General American or British English – upper secondary school students use and prefer. In both studies it can be concluded that the majority of the students use General American more than British English.

Furthermore, the results show that the teachers' choice of variety of English has a major influence on students' choice of variety as well. Östlund, 2005, clarifies rather the same in his study *"British vs. American English – Pronunciation in the EFL Classroom"*, where the results show that if a teacher speaks a certain variety – British English or General American – then the students are most likely to do that as well.

The results of my study also show that the majority of the teachers have very strong attitudes towards the different varieties and thus most of the time adopt one of these varieties. Yet, due to the multicultural world that we live in and the different varieties of English that we are exposed to, it becomes more and more difficult for people to separate the many different varieties that coexist.

To conclude, I also think that in order for the students not to lose interest in learning the English language, it is of great importance that teachers let *them* (the students) choose which variety of English *they* wish to adopt. What I mean is that teachers constantly must make an effort to influence the students towards the language and the learning of it, which, I think and hope, will result in that the students become more motivated as well. This is, however, a completely different issue and would hence most likely be the topic in further research. Since influences from English, due to exposure from society, are very strong it would be very interesting to continue to investigate which variety of English (General American or Standard

English) Swedish students prefer and why. That means, examining the awareness and usage of Standard English and/or General American, as well as the attitudes towards these two varieties.

**“Language is power”**

*(A teacher quotation)*

## Appendix 1: Teacher questionnaire

Sex: Male

Age: 20-30

Female

30-40

40-50

1. What English variety do you speak?

\_ General American

\_ Standard English

\_ Other:.....

2. What is the reason for speaking this variety?

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3. Which variety do you prefer, General American or Standard English? Why?

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4. What variety is being taught in your classroom? Why?

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5. Which variety - General American or Standard English – would you like your students to speak? Why?

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6. What do you think of General American and Standard English?

*General American:*

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*Standard English:*

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7. Any other comments are welcomed.

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***Thank you for participating!***



## Appendix 2: Results from teacher questionnaire

Sex: Male (6)

Female (6)

Age: 20-30 (2)

30-40 (4)

40-50 (6)

1. What English variety do you speak?

\_General American (4)

\_Standard English (7)

\_Other: (1; a variety of both General American and Standard English)

2. What is the reason for speaking this variety?

7 teachers speak Standard English because they were influenced by their teachers.

3 teachers speak General American because they are influenced by media.

1 teacher speaks Standard English because he has lived in England.

1 teacher speaks General American because her relatives live in America.

3. Which variety do you prefer, General American or Standard English? Why?

Teachers prefer Standard English because they find it *“beautiful”, “theoretical”, “class-bound”, “proper”, “correct”, “cooler”, “better”, “prestigious”, “the standard and correct variety”, “nicer”,* etcetera. One teacher clarifies that *“there is more feeling in this variety”*. *“I like British English better since it is the most prestigious variety that I know”* another teacher explains.

Teachers prefer General American because they find it *“neutral”, “easier to spell and pronounce”,* etcetera. In addition one teacher writes: *“I think that it is common that people tend to prefer the variety they were raised with”*. Another teacher puts forward that he prefers General American since *“AmE is heard much on TV, in radio and when travelling”*.

One teacher prefers a mix of General American and Standard English: *“I think that the language is affected by the environment”* she puts forward.

4. What variety is being taught in your classroom? Why?

Teachers teach Standard English because they find it *“amusing”, “formal”, “entertaining”, “educated”,* etcetera. One teacher puts forward that she teaches Standard English since

General American is connected to “*people belonging to the working class*” and “*the uneducated*”. Another teacher explicates: “*I use British English when teaching because people consider it as having a very high status*. One teacher writes: “*I prefer teaching British English. It sounds more ‘correct’*”. Another teacher points out: “*British English simply sounds better than American English does*”.

One teacher teaches General American because she finds it as a “*way of being*”. One teacher explains: “*I teach American English since the pupils and I like it*”. The reason for another teacher’s use of General American when teaching is because “*AmE doesn’t tell much about your class belonging*”.

Teachers that teach a mix of Standard English and General American write: “*There are several differences between these two varieties and they are not that clear. Therefore I think that it is OK to mix*”. Another teacher puts forward: “*I use a variety of American and British English. I think that it is important that the students are exposed to various varieties of English so that they are better equipped outside the classroom too*”. “*Language is power. I \*make\* the students a huge favour*” another teacher that uses a mix of the two varieties points out.

5. Which variety - General American or Standard English – would you like your students to speak? Why?

Teachers prefer their students to speak Standard English because this variety is “*correct*”, “*intelligent*”, “*formal*”, “*the most prestigious variety*”, “*smarter*”, “*better*”, etcetera. One teacher stresses: “*Standard English is the language of education and high class*”.

Teachers prefer their students to speak General American because: “*American English is easier regarding spelling*”, has a “*younger approach*”, sounds “*less snobbish*”, is “*more down to earth*”, “*cooler*”, and etcetera. One teacher prefers his students to speak General American since Standard English is “*old-fashioned*”.

Teachers prefer their students to mix Standard English and General American when speaking because: “*Now, it is more Ok to speak different ‘Englishes’*”. “*Pupils learn much by listening to English spoken in different places*” another teacher puts forward.

6. What do you think of General American and Standard English?

*General American:*

Teachers think of General American as “*informal*”, “*softer*”, “*friendlier*”, “*down to earth*”, “*neutral*”, “*easier to pronounce*”, “*modern*”, “*mainstream*”, “*the future*”, “*cooler*”, etcetera. One teacher thinks that General American has a “*younger approach*” when compared to

Standard English. Another teacher puts forward that General American has a “*boring intonation*”. “*It is much easier to comprehend American English*” a teacher clarifies.

*Standard English:*

Teachers think of Standard English as “*entertaining*”, “*nice to listen to*”, “*nice*”, “*prestigious*”, “*correct*”, “*pure*”, “*better*”, “*smart*”, “*perfect*”, and as having “*high status*”. One teacher puts forward: “*I think that British English is the most prestigious variety of English*”. Another teacher explicates: “*British English is more formal than American English*”. “*British English sounds intelligent*” a teacher points out. One teacher writes: “*British English reveals something about the persons when communicating, which is nice*”. Negative comments concerning Standard English are that it sounds “*snobbish*”. One of these comments is: “*I find RP too snobbish*”.

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